

Farming in King County: A Treasure In Peril



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Do you know where your food comes from?

Surprisingly, many people are not aware of the value of locally grown food (produce, dairy, and meat) and other agricultural products (fiber, flowers, nursery plants). People are separated from the farms that produce their food by political, economic, and physical distances.

Corporate agribusiness manufactures and markets over 95% of the food in the United States. As a result, the number of farms in this country has decreased by two-thirds, though the area of farmland has remained roughly the same. This means most of the US food supply is controlled by multinational corporations that have no allegiance to family farms or local communities, such as those in King County. In addition to global economic pressure, increased population and competition for land use are among some of the serious threats to farming in King County.

Our local food system may be at risk of extinction. Here's why local farming is important to all of us, and ideas about what we can do to support our local farm and food system.

—The food we eat . . .
...is the landscape we create.

Bainbridge Island Farmer and Vintner, Gerard Bentryn, believes if people become aware of the connection between food and a sense of place, and if local food is seen as more precious because it insures preservation of the beauty and community, then farms on the urban fringe will be saved.

Why local farming is important

Why should we be concerned about farming in King County? Local, small-scale farming offers more than fresh, safe food. The benefits of agriculture and farmland include:

- **economic diversity**—the more diversified the local economy the less vulnerable it is to outside events (e.g. market crashes),
- **food security**—local farms are an important resource for the sustainable production of and access to clean, safe, sufficient, food,
- **links to nature**—the presence of farms serves to remind us that the food we eat and other products we depend on come from the earth, the landscape in which we live,
- **jobs, wealth, and income** (especially for rural communities)—by sustaining local agriculture, many economic transactions remain local,
- **preservation of green space and rural character**—productive green space offers aesthetic and environmental benefits (e.g., reduced runoff, groundwater recharge),
- **quality of life**—preserving farms also preserves a culturally and historically important way of life,
- **tourism**—farms offer opportunities for foreign visitors and urban dwellers alike to experience our rural areas and see how food and other products are produced in this area,
- **reduced transportation and processing costs**—when food does not have to travel

hundreds of miles to market both environmental and economic costs are reduced,

- **scenic beauty**—few other land uses afford the beauty in a landscape like that of farmland. Farmland offers scenic relief from the dense urban landscapes of King County.
- **groundwater recharge and flood control**—farmland provides thousands of acres for storing rainfall and runoff; farm soil absorbs water and deposits it in underground aquifers.
- **wildlife habitat**—farms near residential areas are havens for many types of wildlife; farms bordering forest lands serve to buffer wildlife from urbanization.



Many farms in King County neighbor suburban housing developments.

What threatens local farming?

- **Impacts of development and population growth**—development pressure makes less land available for farming. At the same time, dramatic population growth in the region has created conflicts between suburban and rural residents and their farming neighbors.
- **Lack of awareness of the value of local food production**—food is so basic to life that many of us are not aware of what is behind the production of the food on our tables. The global food system has resulted in separation from the food we eat and the farms that grow it.
- **Land prices**—many farms are now more valuable as potential residential or commercial lands. At today's prices most new farmers cannot afford to acquire good farmland, and existing farmers feel economic pressure to sell their land and get out of the farming business.
- **Low profitability**—most farmers agree it has become difficult to make a living as a farmer in King County. Small-scale farmers are hard pressed to compete with large corporate farms that can sell products on a very large scale at low retail prices. Difficulty finding farm labor and in keeping family members interested in working on the farm also contribute to reduced profitability of farming.
- **Lack of future farmers**—the high cost of land and low profitability of farming discourage young people from pursuing farming as a career and lifestyle. As farmers retire, it is increasingly likely that rural land will be bought by those who can afford it but have no interest in sustaining commercial agriculture.
- **Regulatory requirements**—farmers are challenged by more regulations than most businesses. Farmers must comply with environmental, health, labor, and building regulations. Compliance can be costly and can discourage efficient farming practices.
- **Global economic pressure**—multinational corporations control most of the world's food supply making it difficult for small-scale farmers to compete in the conventional marketplace. Both domestic and international trade agreements, whether intentionally or inadvertently, have often strengthened corporate farming at the expense of family operated farms.

Direct marketing and promoting alternative crops to local consumers are two promising approaches to overcoming some of the obstacles to farming on the urban fringe.



Complaints about farm smells, noise, dust, or conflicts between domestic and farm animals detract from any community support farmers feel they once had and make it difficult to market products and pursue farming activities.

King County Farms Then and Now

Farming in Western Washington began as an industry in the early 1820's. Programs like the Homestead Act of 1862 encouraged farmers to come to this area to raise livestock and grow vegetables and fruits for their own use and sale. Since 1945 seventy-five percent of the farmland in King County has disappeared—from 165,635 acres to 42,290 acres in 1992. Currently, just 3% of all King County lands are farms. Most farmland is located in river valleys, areas not well-suited to residential, commercial, or industrial land uses; yet, because of urban growth, agriculture must compete with these other land uses. Agriculture in King County is characterized by small-scale, part-time farming operations specializing in livestock, nursery and greenhouse products, vegetables and fresh fruit.

Sources:

King County Department of Natural Resources. 1996. Farm and Forest Report: A Strategy for Preserving the Working Landscapes of Rural King County, Seattle, WA.
Lehman, Karen. 1995. Dinner at the Global Cafe: It's Tough to Swallow. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis, MN.

What can be done?

✿ Request and buy local products.

Ask for local farm products at your favorite grocery stores and restaurants,

Learn about the [Puget Sound Fresh](http://www.metrokc.gov/farms/index.htm) < www.metrokc.gov/farms/index.htm > campaign to support local farming,

Visit [King County farmers markets](http://king.wsu.edu/Ag/farmersmarkets.htm) < king.wsu.edu/Ag/farmersmarkets.htm > ,

Visit the [Fresh Today](http://www.pierce.wsu.edu/farmers) web site < www.pierce.wsu.edu/farmers >

Join a [community supported agriculture \(CSA\)](http://www.metrokc.gov/dnr/farms/csa.htm) farm < www.metrokc.gov/dnr/farms/csa.htm > .

✿ Visit farms.

Request a copy of the Farm Fresh Guide and Map from the Puget Sound Farm Direct Marketing Association 1733 NE 20th St, Renton, WA 98056

[Remlinger Farms](http://www.rfarm.com) in Carnation, WA < www.rfarm.com > offers tours. Email: webmaster@rfarm.com (425) 451-8740

[U-Pick Farms](http://www.metrokc.gov/dnr/farms/upick.htm) can be found at < www.metrokc.gov/dnr/farms/upick.htm >

✿ Preserve farmland.

[American Farmland Trust](http://www.farmland.org) < www.farmland.org > works to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment.

King County Farmland Preservation Program

Contact Judy Herring, Property Rights Specialist at

(206) 296-1470; Email: judy.herring@metrokc.gov

Puget Sound Farm Trust has been working to preserve farms



Farms like Full Circle Farm in North Bend supply fresh produce to many area restaurants and consumers.

in the Puget Sound Area since 1992. Contact Melinda McBride, P.O. Box 47436, Seattle, WA 98146; E-mail: mac@eskimo.com (206)767-7334

✿ Educate children about farming.

Find out about [King County 4-H](http://king.wsu.edu) programs. Call (206)296-3900 or see the 4-H web page at < king.wsu.edu > .

Tour [Nestle Regional Training Center](http://www.ohwy.com/wa/n/nesregtc.htm) to observe both old and new methods of managing the breeding, feeding and handling of domestic animals. Call (425)788-1511; or see their web site < www.ohwy.com/wa/n/nesregtc.htm > .

Visit [Seattle Tilth's Children's Garden](http://www.speakeasy.org/~tilth/activities/childrensgarden.html). Call (206)633-0451 or see their web site < www.speakeasy.org/~tilth/activities/childrensgarden.html > .

[Remlinger Farms](http://www.rfarm.com) in Carnation, WA has tours and activities for children. Call (425) 451-8740, try the internet at < www.rfarm.com > , or email: webmaster@rfarm.com.

✿ Pass on your farm to a farmer.

Find out about FarmLink, a program to connect new farmers with retiring farmers. Call Eric Nelson (206)296-1469 or email eric-k.nelson@metrokc.gov.

✿ Become a farmer.

Hook up with the [Wannabe Farmers](http://www.scn.org/edu/wannabe) < www.scn.org/edu/wannabe > , a volunteer group offering experience with onsite farming, educational workshops, and an ongoing book group. (206)834-6179; email: wannabe@scn.org.

Attend [workshops](#) on farming given by WSU Cooperative Extension King County (206)205-6388.

✿ Plan your farm finances.

Contact Jeff Goebel at WSU Cooperative Extension in Pullman, WA for information on Holistic Financial Planning (509)335-7342; email goebel@wsu.edu.

✿ Find more information.

[WSU Cooperative Extension King County](http://www.coopext.metrokc.gov) (206)296-3900; email wsu.coopext@metrokc.gov; web < king.wsu.edu > .

[WSU Cooperative Extension in King and Pierce Counties](http://www.pierce.wsu.edu) (253)798-3253; email jakropf@wsu.edu; web < www.pierce.wsu.edu > .

King County Department of Natural Resources, [Agriculture and Resource Lands](http://splash.metrokc.gov/wlr/lands/agricult.htm) (206)296-7803 < splash.metrokc.gov/wlr/lands/agricult.htm > .

King County's Efforts to Preserve Farmland include:

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| 1979 | A public vote to buy farmland development rights which resulted in preservation of 12,600 acres of farmland. |
| 1980s | Designation of Agricultural Production Districts in which zoning requirements include large lot sizes designated for preferred use as agriculture. |
| 1994 | Establishment of the King County Agriculture Commission to advise the county council and executive on agricultural policies and programs. |
| 1995 | Launching of the Farm/Forest Initiative to develop incentives and programs to address issues associated with maintaining farms on the urban fringe. |
| 1997 | Implementation by King County and the Agriculture Commission of solutions outlined in the Farm/Forest Initiative Report. |

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